

A Christmas Memory

By Truman Capote

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Irving Joseph, who wrote the original score for the string quartet which introduces and closes this album, is a prominent name in music circles. Well known as an arranger and conductor both of classical and jazz music, he wrote and performed in the first series of jazz piano

"The Top of A Christmas Memory"
When was sent to me recently
by D.W.P.

IMAGINE a morning in late November. A coming of winter morning more than twenty years ago. Consider the kitchen of a spreading old house in a country town. A great black stove is its main feature; but there is also a big round table and a fireplace with two rocking chairs placed in front of it. Just today the fireplace commands the seasonal room.

While Liane is standing at the kitchen window, she is wearing tennis shoes and a shapeless sweater over a summery calico dress. She is small and sprightly, like a barnyard hen, but, due to a long youthful illness, her shoulders are pitifully hunched. Her face is remarkable—not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind; but it is delicate too, finely boned, and her eyes are sherry-colored and timid. "Oh, my," she exclaims, her breath smoking the window-pane. "It's fruticake weather!"

The person to whom she is speaking is cousin, very distant, she is sixty-something. We are cousins, very distant ones, and we have lived together — well, as long as I can remember. Other people inhabit the house, relatives; and though they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them. We are each other's best friend. She calls me Buddy, in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend. The other Buddy died in the 1880's, when she was still a child. She is still a child.

"I knew it before I got out of bed," she says, turning

away from the window with a purposeful excitement in her eyes. "The courthouse bell sounded so cold and clear. And there were no birds singing; they've gone too warm! Country, yes indeed. Oh Buddy, stop stalling; let me find my hat!"

We're always eager to hark off.

It's always the same: a morning arrives in November, and my friend, as though obliquely inaugurating Christmas time of the year that exhilarates her imagination and fuels the blaze of her heart, announces: It's winter! The weather! Let's put our bunsy. Help me find my hat!

The hat is found, a straw cartwheel corsaged with velvet roses, out-of-doors has faded: it once belonged to a more fashionable relative. Together, we guide our buggy to a dilapidated baby carriage, out to the garden and into a grove of pecan trees. The buggy is mine; that is, it was bought for me when I was born. It is made of wicker, rather unraveled, and the wheels wobble like a drunkard's legs. But it is a faithful object, springtime, we tuck it to the woods and fill it with flowers, herbs, wild ferns for our porch pots; in the summer, we pile it with picnic

Three hours later we are back in the kitchen busting a heaping buggy load of windfall pears. Our backs hurt from gathering them: how hard they were to find (the main crop having been shaken off the trees and sold by now).

cealing leaves, the frosted, deceiving grass. Carackle! A

cherly clutch, scraps or miniature tinker sound as shells collapse and the golden mound of sweet oily meat mounts in a milk glass bowl. Quentin begs to taste and now and again my friend sneaks her a bite, though insisting we deprive ourselves. "We mustn't, Buddy. If we start, we won't stop. And there's scarcely enough as it were." For thirty cakes." The kitchen is growing dark; dusk turns the window into a mirror; our reflections mingle with the rising moon as we work by the fire-side in the freelight. At last, when the moon is quite high, we toss the final hull into the fire and, with joined sighs,

We eat our supper (cold biscuits, bacon, blackberry jam) and discuss tomorrow. Tomorrow the kind of weather I like best begins: buying Cherries and citron, gingerbread and vanilla and canned Hawaiian pineapple, rinds and raisins and walnuts and whiskey and oh, so much flour butter, so many eggs, sugar, flavorings: why, we'll need a pony to pull the buggy home.

But before these purchases can be made, there is the question of money. Neither of us has any. Except for the

skinflints persons in the house occasionally provide (a dime is considered very big money); or what we earned from selling from various activities; holding rummage sales, selling buckets of hand-picked blackberries, jar of homemade jam and apple jelly and peach preserves, rounding up flowers for funerals and weddings. Once we won seventy-ninth prize, five dollars, in a national foot-ball contest. Not that we know a fool-thing about football. It's just that we enter any contest we hear about: the moment our hopes are centered on the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize being offered to name a new brand-

of coffee (we suggested "M.M.", and, after some hesitation, for my friend thought it perhaps sacrilegious, the slogan "M.M. Amen!"). To tell the truth, our only really profitable enterprise was the Fun and Freak Museum we conducted in a back-yard woodshed two summers ago. The Fun was a stereopticon with slide views of Washington and New York lent us by a relative who had been to those places (she was furious when she discovered we had borrowed it); the Freak was a three-legged baby-chicken hatched by one of our own hens. Every body-cherous wanted to see that bird: we charged

But one way and another we do each year accumulate Christmas savings, a Friticate Fund. These moneys were kept hidden in an ancient bead purse under a loose board under the floor under a chamber pot under my friend's bed. The purse is seldom removed from this sacred location except to make a deposit or, as happens every Saturday, a withdrawal; for on Saturdays I am allowed ten cents to go to the picture show. My friend has never

she has never: eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than

five miles from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except funny papers and the Bible, worn cos-

metics, cursed, wished someone hadn't told a lie on punishment. She had to be a little bit of a mad scientist, she has done, does do. Killed with a hoe the biggest rat she's ever seen in this county (sixteen rats!), dip the snuff (secretly), name hummingbirds (just try it), flip their balance on her finger, tell ghost stories (we both believe in ghosts) so tripping they choll you in July, take to herself, take walks in the rain, grow the prettiest japonicas in town, know the recipe for every sort of old-time Indian corn, including a magical water-melon

NOW WITH supper finished, we venture to the room in a faraway part of the house where my friend sleeps in a scrap-quilt-covered iron bed painted rose pink, her favorite color. Silently, wallowing in the pleasures of conspiciacy, we take the head puns from its secret place and spill its contents on the scrap quilt. Dollar pills, tightly rolled and green as May hued, Sombra five-cent pieces, heavy enough to weight a dead man's eyes, Lovely dimes, the liveliest coin, the one that really jingles. Nickels and quarters, worn smooth as creek pebbles. But mostly a hateful heap of bitter-scented pennies. Last summer they

ers in the houses contracted to pay us a penny for every twenty-five flies we killed. Oh, the carnage of August—the flies that flew to heaven! Yet it was not work if we did it. I was a flycatcher, and I was paid for it, which we took pride. And, as we sit counting pennies, it is as though we were back tabulating dead flies. Nonetheless it has a head for figures: we count slowly, lose track, start again. According to her calculations, we have \$127.3. According to mine, exactly \$13. "I do hope you're wrong, Buddy. We can't mess around with this. The cakes will fall. Or put somebody in the cemetery. Why, I wouldn't dream of getting out of bed or

the threehundred... This is true: she always spends hundreds in bed. So, to be on the safe side, we subtract penny and toss it out the window.

Of the ingredients that go into our fruitcakes, whisky is the most expensive, as well as the hardest to obtain. State laws forbid its sale. But everybody knows you can buy a bottle from Mr. Hahn Jorner. And the next day having completed our more prosaic shopping, we set out for Mr. Hahn's business address, a "stint" (to quote the public opinion) fish-fry and dancing call down by the river. We've been there before, and on the same errand.

but in previous years our dealings have been with Hanan's wife, an iodine-dark Indian woman with brassy peroxide hair and a dead-firm disposition. Actually, we've never laid eyes on her husband, though we've heard he's an Indian too. A giant with razor scars across his cheeks. They call him Hanh because he's so gloomy that he never laughs. As we approach his café (a man who never laughs. As we approach his café) a large log cabin festooned inside and out with chains of garthagey naked light bulbs and standing by the river, muddy edge under the shade of river trees where most drifts through the branches like gray mist) our steps

slow down. Even Queenie stops prancing and sticks close by. People have been murdered in Haha's café. Out to pieces. Hit on the head. There's a case coming up in court next month. Naturally these goings-on happen a night when the colored lights cast crazy patterns and devictrola walls. In the daytime Haha's is shabby and de-

sorted. I knock at the door, Queenie barks, my friend

"For a moment we too paralyzed to tell. Presently my friend half-finds her voice; a whispery voice at first: "If you please, Mr. Haha, we'd like a quart of your best whisky." His eyes tell more. Would you believe it? Haha is smiling! Mr. Haha, mah air, advance to home!"

"Footsteps. The door opens. Our hearts overflow. It is Mr. Haha Jones himself! And he is a giant; he *does* have him, *he does!* I smile. No, he glowers at us through Satan-dilled eyes and demands to know: "What you want with Haha?"

ing Laughing, too. "Which one of you is a drinkin' man?"

"It's for making frinkies, Mr. Haha. Cooking."

This sobers him. He frowns. "That's no way to waste good whiskey." Nevertheless, he retreats into the shadowed cave and seconds later appears carrying a bottle of daisy yellow unlabeled liquor. He demonstrates its sparkle in the sunlight and says: "Two dollars."

We pay him with nickels and dimes and pennies. Suddenly, jangling the coins in his hand like a fistful of dice he faces us. "Tell you what," he proposes, pouring the money back into our bead purse, "just send me one of

The black stove, stocked with coal and firewood, glows warmly like a lighted pumpkin. Eggbeaters whirl, spoons spin round in bowls of butter and sugar, vanilla sweetens the air, ginger spices it; melting, nose-tugging odors saturate the kitchen, suffuse the house, drift out to the world on damp, pungent clouds of chimney-smoke. In four days our work is done: thirty-one cakes, dampened with whisky, baked on white-

dow sills and shelves.
Who are they for?
Friends. Not necessarily neighbor friends; indeed, the larger share are intended for persons we've met maybe once, perhaps not at all. People who've struck our fancy. Like President Roosevelt. Like the Reverend and Mrs. J. C. Lucey, Baptist missionaries to Borneo who lectured here last winter. Or the little nifty grinder who comes through town twice a year. Or Abner Packer, whose change of the six o'clock bus from Mobile, who exclaims waves with us every day as he passes in a dist-

cloud whose car. Or the young Winston, a California couple whose car one afternoon broke down outside the house and who spent a pleasant hour chatting with us on the porch (young Mr. Winston snapped our picture). The only one we ever had taken. Is it because my friend is shy with everyone *except* strangers that our true friends, and merest acquaintances, seem to us our strongest? I think yes. Also, the scrapbooks we keep of our "thank-you's" on White House stationery, time to time communications from California and Borneo, the knifepoints of Grindler's penny post cards, make us feel connected to

Now a nude December fig branch grates against the window. The kitchen is empty, the cakes are gone; yes, indeed we carried the last of them to the post office before where the cost of stamps turned our purse inside out. We're broke. That rather depresses me, but my friend insists on celebrating—with two inches of whisky left in Hahn's bottle. Quezama has a spoonful in a bowl of coffee (she likes her coffee chicory-flavored and strong). "The eventful worlds beyond the kitchen with its view of a sky that stops."

test we awoke between a pair of jelly glasses. We're both quite alive at the prospect of drinking straight whiskey—the taste of it brings screwed-up expressions and sound exclamations. But by-and-by we began to sing, the two of us singing different songs simultaneously. I don't know how this singing different songs simultaneously, I don't know how this words to mine, just: *Come on along, come on along, to the darktown strutters' ball*. But I can dance: that's what I mean to be a tap dancer in the movies, that's what I shadow, rollicks on the walls, our voices rock the china were, we giggle: as if women hands were tickling us. Quennie rolls on her back, her paws plow the air, some-

uning like a grin stretched her black lips. Inside myself,